

# Deer-Vehicle Collisions Decline

By Greg Freeman

Statistics released by the North Dakota Department of Transportation have revealed the number of deer-vehicle collisions reported in the state in 2005 showed a decline for the first time in nearly a decade.

Last year, 3,766 deer-vehicle incidents were tallied, down 11 percent from 4,252 recorded in 2004.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists believe this is a response to deer numbers declining toward management goals in some areas of the state. Also, motorists are likely heeding warnings and exercising more caution, especially during months and times of day when deer are most active.

The Game and Fish Department has been aggressive in its approach to managing deer by issuing a record number of licenses the past five years. And the state's deer-vehicle collisions is an important index used in


determining the number of hunting licenses made available in each unit, according to Bill Jensen, Department big game biologist.

"We closely monitor the number of deer-vehicle collisions reported in the state," Jensen said, while noting it is one of a number of indices used to set deer license numbers. "We will continue to be aggressive with deer management, but factors beyond our control may reduce the effectiveness of obtaining this management objective."

Posting and leasing of land, and changes in agricultural practices, are among the many potential factors that can limit the effectiveness of hunting seasons, Jensen said.

The Department will continue its public education efforts by issuing timely deer-vehicle alerts. Reminders are issued in spring and fall cautioning drivers to be aware of deer, especially in areas where deer crossing signs are posted.





Most deer-vehicle accidents occur during dawn and dusk hours when deer are most active, Jensen said. "Deer-vehicle accidents are at times unavoidable," he said. "However, motorists should be aware of warning signs signaling deer are in the area."

When one deer crosses the road, Jensen said, look for a second or third deer to follow. Also, motorists are urged to pay attention on roadways posted with Deer Crossing Area caution signs. "Obviously, deer are known to be in this area," he said, "that is why the sign is there."

There seems to be two peaks in the distribution of deer-vehicle collisions over the course of the year. Late October through early December are peak times for deer-vehicle accidents as an estimated 42 percent occur during this period, Jensen said. "This period coincides with increased activity of deer during breeding season and movements from fall to winter cover," Jensen said.

Not far behind, with about 25 percent of the accidents, is the period from late May through early July. "This is when adult does seek out seclusion during the fawning period, and young from the previous year disperse from their mother's home range," Jensen said.

Many accidents happen during morning and evening hours when motorists are driving to and from work. Statistics reveal 22 percent of deer-vehicle collisions occur between 5:30 and 6:30 p.m., while 13 percent fall between 5:30 and 7:30 a.m. An estimated 88 percent occur when it's dark or light is limited.

Regardless of the deer population, or public education efforts, the peak months and time frames will continue to produce the highest number of collisions because of the overlapping patterns of deer and people.

"Deer behavior indicates they are most active in June and November, and their most active feeding periods are between dusk and dawn," Jensen said. "People will travel most frequently during the morning and evening commuting periods, and during weekends and holidays."

Defensive driving can help prevent deer-vehicle accidents. Drivers should slow down during deer migration seasons, and be especially watchful in areas where roadways border fields, tree rows, thickets and places where deer may feed or take cover, and during twilight hours of dawn and dusk when it is especially difficult to see animals entering the roadway.

Accidents do happen and a local law enforcement agency should be notified. "We do get calls from motorists wondering if they can keep the carcass, or at least the antlers," said Robert Timian, Game and Fish Department law enforcement chief. "A permit is required if someone wants to take possession, or parts, of a roadkill animal."

Permits to possess roadkill deer are free and available from game wardens and local law enforcement offices.

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## Defensive Driving

A few precautions can minimize your chances of injury or property damage in a deer-vehicle collision.

- Always wear your seat belt.
- Don't swerve or take the ditch to avoid hitting a deer. Try to brake as much as possible and stay on the roadway. Don't lose control of your vehicle or slam into something else to miss the deer. You lower your risk of injury by hitting the deer.
- If you spot deer ahead, slow down immediately and honk your horn.
- No published research supports the effectiveness of deer whistles on vehicles. Deer can't hear ultrasonic frequencies.

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*This staged photo using a stuffed deer simply provides an example of what motorists sometimes encounter while driving North Dakota roads.*